

DRAFT

CHAPTER 2

NEIGHBORHOOD HISTORY + CHARACTER

GOAL

Record the history of the Miller-Southside neighborhood that has shaped its eclectic yet cherished character including its street layout, buildings, landscape, and distinguishing features so as to conserve and enhance its heritage and future.

BACKGROUND

The Miller-Southside neighborhood (listed officially as the Miller-Southside Neighborhood Planning Area) is one of twenty-four contiguous neighborhood planning areas comprising the town of Blacksburg, Virginia. Miller-Southside is one of the five neighborhoods encompassing the Midtown South sector, one of eight Comprehensive Planning Sectors of the Town. This sector, the boundary of which was created by Town staff as part of the Town's 1996 Comprehensive Plan, is the sixth largest sector and is comprised of nearly thirteen hundred acres. The Miller-Southside neighborhood is comprised of approximately two hundred acres. The boundaries of the neighborhood are delineated on the map to the right. Its boundary was last revised in September 1999 at a Town organized meeting of neighborhood residents as part of an update to Blacksburg's 2046 Comprehensive Plan.

As Blacksburg moved into the twentieth century, the South Side Land Company began subdividing the farmland located one block southwest of the original town plat at Miller Street. The SSL Company offered lots having 50-foot street frontages on Main and Water streets and 170 feet in depth abutting an 18-foot wide mid-block alley. There were sixteen of these lots to each 400-foot by 358-foot neighborhood block. A prospective buyer could purchase one 50-foot lot, or a lot-and-a-half for 75 feet of frontage, and any additional adjoining lots in 25-foot increments.

The 1921 Sanborn map shows Miller and Eheart streets are each 40 feet wide and Water Street [now Draper Road] is 50 feet wide. From Miller Street south to Eheart Street, the lot-width frontages are delineated as 50 feet, 75 feet, 75 feet, 100 feet, 50 feet, and 50 feet. Setback from Main Street 20-25 feet, five houses are noted as 18 feet wide; two as 28 feet wide.

A 1927 map of Blacksburg shows a network of streets, alleys and blocks of similar size extending to Airport Road, which allowed this pattern of development to continue over several decades. Today Miller-Southside is a walk-friendly neighborhood that is distinguished by its diversity of single-family homes and uniqueness as characterized by its tree-lined streets, alleys and lawns. The houses are a mix of modest cottages and bungalows built in the 1920s, larger colonial-inspired brick structures built in the 1930s, single-story ranchers from the 1950s and a few contemporary homes constructed in the late 1990s. Most houses have detached garages, some with apartments above. Due to the topography some houses have basement apartments with separate entrances.

Many of its buildings and landscape are recorded as one of the Town's two historic districts. In 1987 architect and historian Gibson Worsham surveyed the neighborhood's 835 residential structures and found 127 (as well as 10 houses now occupied by small businesses) were historically significant or substantially contributing structures such that the Miller-Southside Historic District was listed on the National Registry of Historic Places in 1987. In 1985, the Town Council reviewed an application [ordinance 1060] by residents for design guidelines to preserve these structures, however, it was not fully supported by neighborhood residents and not adopted.

Many of the houses were custom built for community leaders and university faculty. Built for ??? in 192?, 614 South Main Street exhibits "Prairie School" massing and details. The first department head for architecture program at Virginia Tech, Clinton H. Cowgill, was the architect for several colonial-inspired houses built in the 1930's— L. C. Beamer at 504 Preston, L. B. Dietrick at 506 Preston, George Herring at 601 Preston, and John Whittemore at 900 Draper. The large copper-roofed house at the corner of Miller and Draper was built in 19?? for ???. At 904 and 908 Draper the Heavener brothers who owned the local hardware store that remains in operation today built two bungalows. In 19??, 604 Preston was built by the Methodist Church for its pastor.

New houses also brought a new landscape. Most houses have front lawns with hedges along the street frontage, side property lines, and alleyways. Several large trees that are over 200-years old also distinguish the neighborhood. One large white oak stands in front of Colonel ??'s house at ??? Eheart Street.

Most houses remain owner-occupied, though several along Main Street have been refurbished and now are inhabited by small businesses and professional offices.. In 1981, the Town granted Special Use permits to Georgeanne Snyder Falkingham that allowed several houses in the 500 and 600 blocks to change use in exchange for restoration of these houses that were rented as apartments and in disrepair. Between Miller Street and Airport Road, there remain only eleven (11) family-occupied homes within the Miller-Southside neighborhood. In the late 1990's several more houses in the 900 block of South Main Street were issued Special Use permits for similar uses.

Airport serves somewhat as a line of demarcation between the older residential parts of the neighborhood and the mix of commercial and residential sections to the southeast. This southeast "triangle", bounded by South Main Street, Country Club Drive, and Airport Road, contains 80 residential homes, ten of which are included within the previously mentioned historic district. [add text about restaurants on South Main, bank, funeral home, etc.]

Although some neighborhoods have distinct boundaries defined by roads or geographic situations, some boundaries are less distinctive. Many residents consider adjacent civic, educational and commercial buildings important to its vitality and part of the neighborhood. To the north, there is the Montgomery/Floyd Regional Library, the Blacksburg Police Station, the Town's Municipal Building as well as various commercial uses. To the south, there is Beeks Elementary School and Gables Shopping Center. "Beeks" completed in 1963, was named for a beloved Blacksburg High School teacher and former principal, Miss Margaret Jerusha Beeks (1892-1992). On the East, the former Blacksburg Middle School is currently occupied by the ??? Academy. Miller-Southside's proximity to these areas is a primary asset as residents can walk, jog, ride a bicycle, or take a bus to run errands, socialize, recreate, relax, attend school, or commute to work.

Another significant feature is the Huckleberry Trail, which in the early 1990's transformed the abandoned railroad tracks on the southwestern border of the neighborhood into an asphalt-paved path for walkers, joggers and cyclists. Gibson Worsham's extensive recording of houses also includes documentation of the opening of this railroad spur from Cambria to Blacksburg in 1904 by the Virginia Anthracite and Coal Railroad and nicknamed the "Huckleberry Railroad." Worsham also notes that the first depot was small and in the vicinity of the current library; the second, more substantial one was located where the municipal building is today. Today the trail extends for six miles, from Blacksburg to its southernmost end at the New River Valley Mall on the outskirts of Christiansburg, Virginia. The Huckleberry Trail is highlighted on the map to the left.

[need to include recent transformation of older homes with additions and add conclusion]